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OSCAR SLATER: *what happened...*

In the last edition of SIGNET MAGAZINE we told the story of William Roughead WS and the Oscar Slater trial, one of the most notorious Scottish criminal cases of the 20th century. What happened after Oscar Slater was acquitted at his second trial in 1928 is less well known but just as intriguing. By KAREN BASTON.

In July 1928 Oscar Slater became a free man. Having spent nearly two decades in prison for a crime he had not committed - the brutal murder of the Glasgow pensioner and jewellery collector Miss Marion Gilchrist in 1908 - Slater had won a fresh trial. The questionable evidence that had been used to convict him in 1909 was challenged by the noted

Roughead and a group of fellow campaigners, who included Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the Glasgow journalist William Park, and the Lord Advocate Craigie Aitchison, had worked to bring Slater's cause to public attention and then to court. But the appeal case generated legal costs and, despite donations from supporters (some of whom fully expected to be repaid in the event of a successful appeal), Slater was left with debts to pay. Conan Doyle

on the payment.

Slater meanwhile seemed diffident about repaying the money spent on his behalf. Conan Doyle, who hoped that the government would offer Slater more so that he could be reimbursed, wrote to *The Times* describing the lack of any forthcoming payment as "very unfair" in a letter to the editor of 17th September 1927. He went on to say that he was "quite ready to meet my

**"FORTUNATELY THERE ARE
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criminologist William Roughead WS who had not only attended Slater's original trial but had published his concerns about the evidence of the case in his books for the Notable Scottish Trials series. Roughead continued collecting materials about Slater in his scrapbooks after the appeal including newspaper cuttings and correspondence. These are preserved in the Roughead Collection which was given to the Signet Library by the Roughead family in 1952.

thought that Slater should ask for £10,000 (about £1.5 million today) in compensation from the government for the time he had wrongly spent in prison. Slater, presumably eager to put a speedy end to a bleak chapter in his life, accepted £6,000 (about £902,000 today) from the Scottish Office in August 1928. He had not taken advice from his influential supporters and they saw the amount as too little since it did not include his legal costs. They were also horrified to learn that Slater would be required to pay income tax

own promises and guarantees – and the lawyers engaged have been most generous in their treatment – but it seems a shocking travesty of justice that, having worked so long to set this wrong right, I should now be asked to pay a considerable sum in addition".

The House of Commons debated the question of Slater's legal costs in November 1928. Inspired by this, Slater approached the House of Commons directly to request funds: "I should have thought that the

Government in common fairness ought not to expect me to bear the costs of this case", he wrote from Ayr on 5th December. He went on, "I might add that as a consequence of my conviction I lost personal property and incurred expenses - prior to the appeal - amounting to about £1,000". Slater argued that his payment only covered the cost of his compensation and pointedly reminded the officials of his "18 years 11 ½ months imprisonment". Furthermore, the "payment of £6,000 was suggested and accepted merely as a consequence of my wrongful conviction and subsequent imprisonment".

pleased by Slater's behaviour and he was not "prepared to submit to such treatment, and I shall be reluctantly driven to assert my rights in a court of law unless this man has the common decency to pay for his own debts of his own free will and without compulsion".

Slater claimed in the *Evening Dispatch* of 13th September 1929 that he had offered Conan Doyle money for his expenses after his appeal but had been turned down. He argued that Conan Doyle had in effect already been paid since "he made money out of me. He wrote eight articles about me for the Scottish newspapers, and was paid £400". Slater said he had

Slater, meanwhile, was found enjoying the good life in Brighton. He reiterated his accusation that Conan Doyle had used him to make a profit financially and morally: "He raised a subscription for me and people said 'How good he is'. But I did not want a subscription. I had got £2,000 from the newspapers, and I offered to pay my own expenses. They would not hear of it then, when there was fame to be won, but now, when all the fame is gone, they ask me to pay".

Conan Doyle privately wrote to Roughead in an undated note to thank him for his support during these trying times: "Many thanks, my dear Roughead. Such things are more than money". But there was a plan afoot that could resolve the conflict. In the same note Conan Doyle continued: "Slater has a libel action which he will win against a Scotch paper. £500 will be paid to settle it. I have a lawyer who proposes to intercept this sum in court and deduct £280 which is due to me. Rather a good scheme".

The *Evening Dispatch* reported that Slater's libel award had been arrested at "the instance of Sir Arthur" and that "the action is now pending in the Court of Session" on 13th September. The action was eventually settled out of court when Slater paid Conan Doyle £250 towards his personal expenses.

Slater remained in touch with Roughead, even sending him a Christmas card in 1930, and Roughead continued to collect material about him for his Slater Case scrapbooks. He made the news again in 1936 when he married Miss Lina Wilhelmina Schad in Glasgow where he had settled. The couple later retired to Ayr where Slater died in 1948.



Oscar Slater

The Scottish Office replied quickly and Slater had his answer in a letter of 13th December: "His Majesty's Government are not prepared to make any payment in addition to the ex gratia sum of £6,000 which was paid to you in August last". This was the government's final answer on costs.

Conan Doyle was appalled by what he saw as Slater's ungentlemanly unwillingness to repay those, especially himself, who had bankrolled his appeal. The two entered into a bitter public dispute. Conan Doyle eventually paid the outstanding legal bill of £330 with his own money in May 1929. He wrote to the *Empire News* on 2nd May stating that had Slater lost his appeal he would have "cheerfully taken this heavy expense upon myself, but as he has received £6,000 compensation it seems a monstrous thing that these charges should be met by me". Furthermore, he was not

been vulnerable upon his release from prison and that "everything was done for me. My appeal was arranged by men who, I thought at the time, were my friends".

The *Daily Mail* interviewed both parties and published a report on 14th September 1929. An exasperated Conan Doyle responded to Slater's statements of the day before saying "One can only think he is mad - deranged perhaps by his experiences". As for making a profit from Slater's experiences, Conan Doyle was adamant: "Making money! For 18 years I worked for him. I wrote a book about him which sold for 6d. and never brought me a penny. I wrote one or two articles for the London Press, but I never wrote for the Scottish papers and certainly received no such remuneration as £400... Fortunately there are not many Oscar Slaters in the world".

We are very grateful to Lord Cullen of Whitekirk for kindly drawing our attention to this sequel to the Oscar Slater trial.
